

VZCZCXRO4382
PP RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH
DE RUEHGO #0368/01 0782335
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 192335Z MAR 06
FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4301
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0735
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0142
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 9506
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 4057
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1532
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3234
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0382
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 0131
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 6607
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4221
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 0652
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 0653
RUDKIA/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0268
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2587
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0238
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 000368

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/13/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [ELAB](#) [BM](#)
SUBJECT: BURMESE FUTURE LOOKING DIRE

REF: A. A) BEIJING 3393

[1](#)B. B) RANGOON 207

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Classified By: CDA Shari Villarosa for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Leon de Riedmattan, outgoing head of the Swiss NGO Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Burma, hosted a lunch March 15 for western Ambassadors. De Riedmattan, whose visa has been halted after nine years of efforts to promote national reconciliation, offered a grim assessment of the current situation. Nevertheless, he plans to stay engaged from Bangkok and provided a copy of a proposed "Common Approach" that he has already discussed with senior NLD leaders and some ASEAN officials. He will continue to promote a political transition to democracy, which could well find favor in the international community. No one really knows if it will find any favor among the Burmese military. We recommend that Washington officials meet with de Riedmattan during his planned visit there April 5; he can provide valuable insights. End Summary.

First, An ILO Update

[1](#)2. (C) Even before all the Ambassadors had gathered, de Riedmattan provided a negative assessment of the visit of ILO official Francis Maupain March 12 and 13. The only official that would meet with the Maupain was the Labor Minister, the same Minister de Riedmattan blames for the non-renewal of his visa. Maupain had "extensive meetings" over the two days, but accomplished neither of his objectives: 1) to set up a

mediation mechanism for forced labor reports; and 2) to implement fully Burmese Law 374 against forced labor. Reportedly, the Labor Minister would only agree to work on the mediation mechanism with the ILO liaison officer rather than any outside parties, termed "unworkable" by de Riedmattan since it would prevent the liaison officer from conducting his own investigations. In addition, the Labor Minister insisted that the law against forced labor is sufficient as is, and needs no further refinement.

Bad and Getting Worse

13. (C) After all the Ambassadors (UK, Germany, France, Italy, Australia and Charge) had gathered, de Riedmattan related recent discussions with senior GOB officials that led him to conclude that the internal political situation was bad, and likely to get worse. He cited specifically the recent revisions to NGO regulations as evidence of this. His government sources claimed they were intended to drive foreigners out. The sources said that no one can get through to SPDC Chairman Than Shwe and the "neo-Ne Winists" surrounding him. (Note: Ne Win implemented the first go it alone policies after he took power in 1962, which began Burma's downward economic decline, briefly halted when the regime opened up to foreign investors in the 1990s, but steadily falling since the late 1990s.)

14. (C) This prompted a discussion of how much Than Shwe really knows about the current situation of the country. Does he really believe the fantasy reports printed in the government-controlled press? The public certainly does not, based on our discussions with them, finding no credibility in regime propaganda. Than Shwe knows he is unpopular but, according to de Riedmattan, does not care. A discussion ensued on whether some elements of the military could be

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peeled away. Several cited reports of increasing discontent in military ranks, as people realize they work for a lunatic.

All believed that the move to Pyinmana had been unpopular among the military. However, the Australian Ambassador cautioned that no one had any direct evidence that the military was fraying. In his opinion, the military's interests were best insured by supporting Than Shwe; any conditions to gain legitimacy would not be more attractive than what they already have. The French Ambassador said the U.S. had brokered a good solution in Georgia (where he formerly served as Ambassador) in persuading Shevardnadze to step down while retaining all his perks.

Is a "Common Approach" Forward Possible?

15. (C) De Riedmattan plans to continue seeking some political resolution in Burma from Bangkok. He distributed a proposed "Common Approach" that he had already discussed with some ASEAN nations and the NLD leaders, U Aung Shwe and U Lwin. While in Thailand, he plans to discuss his proposal with the Burmese exile community. Although he had not yet received any reaction from any of his initial interlocutors, he nonetheless sought the support of the European Ambassadors for a possible ASEM-ASEAN joint approach to persuade the Burmese regime to accept it. The proposal calls for a working group of the military, democracy party leaders (including those currently detained or imprisoned), and ethnic leaders to inter alia develop the guiding principles for a new constitution, define political and economic reform priorities, permit the military a continuing transitional role, permit the transition of armed ethnic groups into new legal entities, grant a nationwide amnesty, and eventually hold free and fair elections. He proposes specific members of international community support this process by matching each positive step taken by the Burmese with positive action, such as financial and technical assistance or partial lifting of sanctions. The U.S. would be asked to back this process

once it got underway by agreeing to technical assistance by the international financial institutions.

16. (C) Since the Ambassadors did not have a chance to read the proposal ahead of time, they discussed the challenge of getting Burmese to agree on anything. De Riedmattan's oral description of his proposal sounded similar to the NLD proposal announced on February 12 (ref B) that would give the military a transitional role as the executive in return for convening the remaining parliamentarians elected in 1990.

Most observers viewed the NLD proposal a positive effort to show unity among the pro-democracy activists. However, the British Ambassador complained that Burmese believe in unity only if they are the ones in charge. Better to advise the pro-democracy activists to be more pragmatic, she asserted. She also doubted that talking to the Burmese exiles would be of any use.

17. (C) Not to be dissuaded, de Riedmattan noted that the international community had begun showing greater consensus with regard to Burma, as seen by the UNSC discussion and increasing ASEAN criticism. The German Ambassador insisted that the Chinese "totally" support the current regime. He expressed surprise at Charge's summary of the briefing offered to the diplomatic community by the Chinese Foreign Ministry after the recent Prime Minister Soe Win visit (ref A). The others agreed that the Chinese wanted stability and could not afford to depend solely on the current regime, which they also recognized has no popular support. Burma's

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geographic position between India and China ensured that neither could ignore it, all agreed. How can India "Look East" without Burma, asked the French Ambassador. Burma offered too many things that China needed or wanted, added others.

Comment

18. (C) De Riedmattan will be in Washington April 5 and we recommend that EAP meet with him at a high level and organize other meetings with NSC and DRL. He has a wealth of experience dealing with the many political players in Burma, his proposal merits thoughtful consideration, and he will provide valuable insights on Burma. He forged a close friendship with Aung San Suu Kyi during this time, first as ICRC representative in Burma, and then mediator between the SPDC and NLD. His previous contacts with the military were primarily with Khin Nyunt, so we are not surprised that the current military leaders see no utility in his continued presence. He had also been the ILO's preferred facilitator, but we have seen that the military has little use for the ILO. That this disregard extends to the entire international community comes as no surprise either. However, it does lead to the conclusion that Than Shwe will not give this proposal any consideration. No one expects him to accept the NLD proposal either. The utility of these proposals are in trying to reach those military officers wondering about the direction that Than Shwe is taking them, who might find alternative directions more appealing. Without some sort of military backing, we see little evidence that the pro-democracy forces can influence or move Than Shwe out by themselves.

VILLAROSA